

Life as Narrative: Time, Answerability, and the Unfinalizable Self Narrative Identity, Antenarrative, and the Meaning of a Human Life in the Philosophy of Life

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ABSTRACT

This paper defends a philosophically precise version of the thesis that human life is constituted, understood, and made meaningful in a narrative form, and argues that this thesis belongs at the centre of the philosophy of life. It grounds the thesis in the classical aporia of time — Augustine's *distentio animi* and Aristotle's *muthos* — and in Ricoeur's demonstration that narrative accomplishes in poetics what speculation cannot accomplish in the aporetics of time: through the threefold *mimesis* it configures the discordance of lived time into the "concordant discordance" of a followable story, and so yields *narrative identity* as the mediation of sameness (*idem*) and selfhood (*ipse*). Situated against both the substance theory of the self and the Lockean–Parfitian reductive view, narrative identity is shown to answer the "characterization" question that the personal-identity debate leaves open. The paper then reconstructs the philosophy-of-life lineage of the thesis (Dilthey, Bergson, Nietzsche) and its phenomenology of temporality, embodiment, and the life-world (Husserl, Heidegger, Bakhtin), before confronting its two strongest objections: Strawson's "Against Narrativity," which distinguishes Episodic from Diachronic selfhood and warns that narrative coherence falsifies a life, and the phenomenological claim (Zahavi, Gallagher) that a pre-narrative minimal self is more basic than any storied one. Conceding the force of both against *strong* narrativity, the paper develops an alternative position drawn from dialogism and organizational storytelling: the self as an *answerable, unfinalizable, antenarrative* process. Uniting Bakhtin's non-alibi in Being and unfinalizability with Boje's concept of antenarrative — the fragmentary, forward-"bet" story that precedes closure — it argues that a life is neither a finished plot nor a mere sequence of episodes but an open, prospective, co-authored storying-in-becoming. This position preserves the narrative constitution of meaning while dissolving the worry about false coherence, and it reframes the meaning of life, authenticity, and self-creation as achievements of an authorship that remains answerable and is never complete

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Introduction: The Forgetting of Life and the Return of Story

Time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative. (Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1, 1984)

The philosophy of life begins from a complaint and a suspicion. The complaint is that the tradition has seldom made *life* itself its theme, subordinating it to being, substance, consciousness, subject, or language, and treating the lived as a mere instance of something more fundamental. The suspicion is that this subordination is not accidental but symptomatic — that thought flees the one phenomenon in which it is always already immersed and from which it can win no distance. Life is what we cannot get outside of, and precisely for that reason it resists the objectifying gaze that philosophy has trained on everything else. And yet human beings do achieve a kind of relation to their lives as wholes, not by stepping outside them but by *telling* them. We recount our days, retrieve our pasts, project our futures, and render ourselves intelligible to others and to ourselves in the form of stories. Sartre's Roquentin captured both this compulsion and its ambivalence: a man is always a teller of tales, living surrounded by his own stories and those of others, who "tries to live his life as if he were recounting it" (Sartre, 1938/1964) — a formulation that already contains the suspicion, to be examined below, that to narrate a life may be to falsify as much as to disclose it. This paper takes that ordinary competence, together with its ambivalence, as a philosophical clue: that human life is constituted, understood, and made meaningful in a narrative form, and that a philosophy of life must therefore be, in decisive part, a philosophy of the storied self.

The thesis must be stated with care, for it is easily caricatured and easily overstated. It does not claim that a life is *merely* a story, as though existence were fiction; nor that every life is, or ought to be, a well-made plot with a satisfying design; nor that there is no self at all prior to the telling. It claims something more disciplined: that narrative is the specific form in which the sheer succession of lived moments becomes a *human* time — a time gathered into a life that is *someone's*, with a past that is owned, a present that is inhabited, and a future toward which one is underway. The thesis is at once ontological (concerning what a self is), epistemological (concerning how a life is understood), and ethical (concerning how a life is owned and answered for). The argument of this paper is that, so stated, the thesis survives the strongest objections brought against it in recent philosophy — but only when it is reconceived, against a widespread assumption, as a claim not about the *closure* of a life into a finished plot but about the *openness* of a life as an answerable and never-completed telling.

The path to that conclusion is philosophical throughout. Section II locates the thesis in the classical aporia of time and Ricoeur's poetics of narrative, and positions narrative identity within the modern debate on personal identity between substance and reductionism. Section III reconstructs the philosophy-of-life lineage — Dilthey, Bergson, Nietzsche — that first made

life a category and already reached, without the concept, for narrative. Section IV develops the phenomenology of temporality, embodiment, and the life-world on which the thesis rests. Section V states its two strongest objections in their full force. Section VI advances the paper's own position — the answerable, unfinalizable, antenarrative self — and defends it against a Strawsonian rejoinder. Section VII proposes, as the paper's methodological contribution, an antenarrative analytic of a life. Section VIII draws the consequences for meaning, authenticity, and self-creation. Section IX concludes.

1. The Aporia of Time and the Poetics of Emplotment

The philosophical root of the narrative thesis lies in the oldest and hardest of problems, the problem of time, and in the discovery that what speculation cannot resolve about time, narrative can nonetheless *configure*. Augustine gave the aporia its canonical form. "What then is time?" he asks in Book XI of the *Confessions*; "if no one asks me, I know; if I wish to explain it to one who asks, I know not" (Augustine, 397–400/1991). Neither past nor future exists, and the present has no extension; yet we measure time and speak confidently of long and short durations. Augustine's solution is to relocate time in the soul: what we measure is not the events themselves but their impression upon us, and the present is threefold — a present of things past (memory), a present of things present (attention), and a present of things future (expectation). Time is *distentio animi*, the distension or stretching of the soul across these three intentions, and this distension is lived as a discordance, a being-pulled-apart that Augustine experiences as the very restlessness of the mortal, sinful self.

To this Augustinian aporetics of time Ricoeur (1984) added an Aristotelian poetics of action. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle had defined tragedy as the *mimesis* of an action and had located its soul not in character but in the *muthos*, the plot — the "organization of the events" (*systasis tōn pragmatōn*) into a whole with a beginning, a middle, and an end, such that the incidents follow one another not merely episodically but by probability or necessity (Aristotle, 335 BCE/1987). Emplotment, for Aristotle, is precisely the operation that transforms a mere succession into a followable and intelligible order. Ricoeur's decisive move is to bring these two texts into relation: the discordance that Augustine could only suffer in the aporetics of time is the very material that Aristotelian *muthos* draws into concordance in the poetics of narrative. Narrative is thus, in Ricoeur's phrase, a "concordant discordance" (*concordance discordante*): it does not abolish the contingency and dispersion of lived time but configures them, without erasing them, into a story that can be followed. Time becomes human time, he concludes, to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative.

Ricoeur schematizes this configuring power as a threefold *mimesis*. *Mimesis*₁, prefiguration, is the always-already narrative pre-understanding of the field of action — our practical familiarity with agents, motives, ends, and the symbolic and temporal texture of conduct.

*Mimesis*₂, configuration, is the properly poetic act of emplotment, which "grasps together" heterogeneous elements — agents, ends, means, circumstances, reversals — into the temporal unity of one story. *Mimesis*₃, refiguration, is the moment at which the configured story is received by a reader or a liver of the life and returns to reshape the field of action from which it arose; here the circle closes, for the story does not merely copy a life but works back upon it. This hermeneutic circle between time and narrative is not a vicious circularity but the very structure of self-understanding: we understand our lives by configuring them, and we live them in the light of the configurations we and our culture have available.

From this poetics Ricoeur derives the concept for which the thesis is best known in philosophy, *narrative identity*, and here it must be located within the modern debate on personal identity. The tradition offers two dominant answers to the question "what makes a person at one time the same as a person at another?" The first is the substance answer: an enduring soul or self underlies and owns all change. The second is the reductive answer descending from Locke, who tied personal identity to continuity of consciousness and memory rather than to any substance (Locke, 1689/1975), and radicalized by Parfit (1984), for whom personal identity consists in nothing but relations of psychological continuity and connectedness that admit of degrees, so that identity "is not what matters." Ricoeur's contribution is to show that this debate conflates two questions that must be distinguished — the question of *reidentification* (what makes X the same entity over time) and the question of *characterization* (who someone is, what self they are) — and that narrative answers the second where neither substance nor reduction can. Narrative identity mediates between two senses of the self: *idem*-identity, the sameness of character, disposition, and habit that makes one recognizable and predictable, and *ipse*-identity, the selfhood of the one who gives a word and keeps it, who stands answerable for a promise across time even as character changes (Ricoeur, 1992). Where the substance theory freezes the self and the reductive theory dissolves it, the narrative theory holds that who one is is the ongoing, revisable *story* that binds *idem* and *ipse* together — a self that is neither a thing nor a mere series but a task. Marya Schechtman (1996) formalized exactly this point as the shift from the "reidentification question" to the "characterization question," and defended a *narrative self-constitution view* on which a person constitutes an identity by organizing experience into a narrative that shapes agency and grounds responsibility.

2. From Lebensphilosophie to the Narrative Self

That "life" (*Leben*) should be philosophy's own category, understood through the articulations life itself supplies, was the founding conviction of the philosophy of life, and it already contained the narrative thesis in embryo. Wilhelm Dilthey held that the elementary unit of the human sciences is *Erlebnis*, lived experience, and that lived experience is never an isolated atom but is always bound into a *Zusammenhang des Lebens*, a structural nexus in which each

present carries the sedimented meaning of a past and the anticipation of a future (Dilthey, 1976). Against the causal explanation (*Erklären*) proper to nature, the human sciences proceed by understanding (*Verstehen*), and the categories through which they understand — meaning, value, purpose, development — are drawn from the temporal self-articulation of life. The great fact, for Dilthey, is reflexive: here life understands life; and its highest instance is autobiography, in which the connectedness of a course of life is grasped by the very one who has lived it. This is *Lebensphilosophie* reaching for narrative without yet possessing the term. Henri Bergson supplied the complementary analysis of lived time. Beneath the spatialized, homogeneous time of the clock and of physics lies *durée*, real duration, in which moments are not external units set side by side but interpenetrate in a qualitative multiplicity, each coloured by all that has gone before, like the notes of a melody heard as a single movement (Bergson, 1889/1910). Duration is the time of a life as it is lived from within, and its continuity is the very continuity that narrative will later render tellable.

Friedrich Nietzsche added the note of danger that any honest philosophy of life must sound, and did so, significantly, under the title of *life* itself. In "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," Nietzsche (1874/1997) argued that a living being needs memory but also, and equally, the art of *forgetting*: an excess of history, an inability to let the past close and fall silent, cripples action and buries the living present under the weight of what has been. There is a degree of remembering that is hostile to life, and a health that requires the capacity to draw a horizon around oneself and to leave much untold. The remark is prophetic for the argument to come, for it locates within the philosophy of life itself the worry that self-narration can become a burden and a falsification rather than a liberation — the very worry that the anti-narrativist will press. A philosophy of the storied self that ignored Nietzsche's warning would deserve the objection it invites.

Within this lineage the properly narrative thesis received its modern articulation. Jerome Bruner distinguished two irreducible modes of thought — the paradigmatic, seeking formal law, and the narrative, tracking the vicissitudes of human intention through time — and argued that it is the narrative mode that organizes the experience and memory of human happenings (Bruner, 1986, 1991); pressing the point, he held that a life as *lived* is inseparable from a life as *told*, since the forms available for telling a life become the forms in which one is able to live it (Bruner, 1987). Alasdair MacIntyre drew the ethical consequence: an action is intelligible only as a moment in a history, "man is essentially a story-telling animal," and a single human life possesses the unity of a *narrative quest* — a search for a good not wholly specifiable in advance, pursued across the whole span from birth to death and answerable to the tradition and community whose stories teach the young what the virtues are for (MacIntyre, 1981/2007). Anthony Kerby (1991) radicalized the constitution claim, arguing that the self is less an author pre-existing its narratives than an implied subject generated in the act of self-narration; Charles

Taylor (1989) argued from moral psychology that to have an identity is to be oriented in a space of strong evaluations, an orientation that is unavoidably narrative because knowing where I stand requires grasping how I came here and where I am bound. Finally, the thesis is irreducibly *relational*. Hannah Arendt (1958/1998) observed that *who* someone is — as distinct from *what* they are — is disclosed only in the story of their deeds and words, a story the agent cannot author alone because its meaning appears only to the others who witness and retell it; and Adriana Cavarero (2000) built on Arendt a theory of the *narratable self* who desires and depends upon the tale that others alone can tell, so that selfhood is from the first exposed and entrusted to the narration of others.

3. Temporality, Embodiment, and the Life-World

The narrative thesis answers most directly to the concern that binds the philosophy of life to phenomenology: temporality. At the microstructural level, Husserl showed that even the perception of a single enduring object or melody is possible only because consciousness is not confined to a knife-edge present but holds a "just-past" in *retention* while anticipating a "just-about-to-come" in *protention*, so that the living present is always already temporally thick, a comet with a tail of retention and a horizon of protention (Husserl, 1893–1917/1991). This is the phenomenological germ of narrative: the same holding-together of the no-longer and the not-yet that makes a melody audible makes a life followable. David Carr (1986) drew the consequence for the narrative thesis: because this holding-together already structures the humblest perception and action, narrative coherence is not a form imposed from outside upon an intrinsically formless life but the thematization and extension of a coherence that experience already possesses — a decisive reply to those who treat emplotment as merely retrospective fiction. At the existential level, Heidegger radicalized the analysis. Human existence (*Dasein*) is not *in* time as a thing in a container but is temporal in its very being: to exist is to be *ahead-of-itself* (future), *already-in* a world (having-been), and *alongside* entities (present) — the three "ecstases" of a temporality (*Zeitlichkeit*) whose ownmost horizon is being-toward-death, the anticipation of one's own end as the possibility that individualizes and totalizes a life (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Because *Dasein* is thrown (*Geworfenheit*) into possibilities it did not choose and yet must take over, authentic existence takes the form of a *resolute retrieval* (*Wiederholung*) of inherited possibilities — a structure that is, formally, the structure of a life owning its story rather than merely undergoing it.

Ricoeur's mediation of Augustine and Aristotle can now be seen in its full stakes: narrative is the practice in which the aporias of time exposed by Husserl and Heidegger — the discordance of the ecstases, the abyss between the time of the soul and the time of the world — are given a configured, human, communicable form. Bakhtin named the deep entanglement of temporality and narration the *chronotope*, the intrinsic connectedness of time and space in every

act of telling, in which temporal relationships take on flesh and become perceptible (Bakhtin, 1937/1981); there is no telling of a life that is not at once the shaping of a lived time and the placing of a body in a world. For the storied self is embodied and worldly, never a disembodied narrator surveying its life from nowhere. The life that is told is lived from a particular body, in a particular place, among particular others, within the *Lebenswelt*, the pre-theoretical horizon of taken-for-granted significance that Husserl (1936/1970) recovered as the forgotten ground of all the sciences and that supplies the standing background against which anything can show up as mattering. Contemporary philosophy of cognition has made the embodiment of self-narration explicit: our narratives are not free-floating texts but are scaffolded by bodily habit and by material and social environment, so that the storying of a life is itself an embodied and situated act (Menary, 2008). When we attend to how lives are *actually* narrated — haltingly, collaboratively, in fragments, revised under pressure, contested by others who were also present — we find not the closed autobiographies of philosophical convenience but stories still in the making, whose endings are unavailable because the lives are not yet over. It is to that unfinished roughness that the strongest objections appeal, and there, too, that they are answered.

4. Two Objections: Against Narrativity and the Minimal Self

Two objections stand between the thesis and its acceptance, and a philosophy of life that evaded them would forfeit its seriousness. The first is Galen Strawson's "Against Narrativity" (2004), the most influential recent challenge. Strawson distinguishes a *psychological* Narrativity thesis (descriptive: human beings typically experience their lives as a narrative) from an *ethical* Narrativity thesis (normative: to do so is good, even necessary for a full or moral life), and observes that narrativists characteristically assert both and derive the second from the first. Against both he sets a difference in the form of temporal self-experience. Some people are *Diachronic*, experiencing themselves as entities that persist across the long term, the very self that was present in childhood and will be present at the end. Others — Strawson among them — are *Episodic*, with little sense of themselves as something that was there in the further past or will be there in the further future. An Episodic person, he insists with examples, is fully capable of moral seriousness, loyalty, and depth, yet does not live her life as a single unfolding story and feels no lack in this. If such lives are possible and good, the descriptive thesis fails as a universal claim and the normative thesis fails outright, since it would disparage an entire legitimate form of human existence. Strawson presses a sharper, ethical worry that echoes Nietzsche's: the demand to make a coherent story of one's life may corrupt rather than aid self-knowledge, since the form-finding, story-telling tendency revises and confabulates the past, imposing a spurious unity and a false inevitability upon what was contingent and disjointed; the honest life may be the one that resists the seductions of plot. Kindred cautions come from Peter Lamarque (2004), who argues that narrativists illegitimately import features of *literary* narrative — closure, thematic unity, a controlling design — into the looser sense in which a life

might have a story, and from Hayden White (1987), who contends that narrative form is never innocent, that emplotment into a closed, well-formed story imports a moral meaning the events themselves lack, so that to narrate is already, in some measure, to moralize.

The second objection is phenomenological and, in a sense, more fundamental. Dan Zahavi (2005) and Shaun Gallagher (2000) argue that beneath any narrative self lies a *minimal* or *core* self — the pre-reflective, tacit self-givenness or "mineness" that any conscious experience already possesses before any story is told about it. This minimal self is not a narrative construction; it is the condition for there being anyone for whom a narrative could be composed at all. The narrator, on this view, has mistaken a real but *higher-order* achievement — the extended, reflectively articulated narrative self — for the foundation, when in truth it rests upon a more basic experiential selfhood that is not narrative in the least. The point is decisive against one version of the thesis: if the narrator claims that there is *no* self whatever prior to self-narration, the claim overreaches, for the very subject who narrates must already be given to itself as the one who narrates.

These objections are not to be dismissed, and this paper does not attempt to refute them; it concedes what they establish. Together they establish that *strong* narrativity is false in three respects. It is not true that every life is *experienced* as a single continuous story — Strawson's Episodics are real. It is not true that a life must be made into one coherent, closed, retrospectively unified plot to be good or genuine — the normative thesis overreaches, and its drive to closure moralizes contingency (White) and expects of a life what only literature affords (Lamarque). And it is not true that *all* selfhood is narratively constituted — a minimal first-personal self underlies every telling (Zahavi, Gallagher). What the objections do *not* establish is that meaning, personal identity across time, and the intelligibility of a life can dispense with narrative altogether. The minimal self grounds experience but composes no biography; it cannot answer the question "who are you?" with a life. And the Episodic, as the next section argues, does not in fact live without storying — she declines only one particular and particularly distorting *mode* of it. To see this we need a conception of the life-story that is not the finished literary artifact these critics rightly reject, but something more temporal, more open, and more faithful to how a life is actually storied. Such a conception can be assembled from two sources the debate has largely overlooked: Bakhtin's ethics and poetics of unfinalized selfhood, and the concept of *antenarrative* developed in the study of organizational storytelling.

5. The Answerable, Unfinalizable, Antenarrative Self

The paper's own position begins from a fact the theorists of the well-made plot have tended to ignore but that the study of storytelling in organizations makes unavoidable: in the actual life of any collective, and of any person, stories are seldom whole. They circulate as fragments, allusions, and interruptions; they are begun by one and finished by another, or never finished at

all; they are told in different "rooms" to different audiences who never assemble the whole; and above all they are *bets on the future*, provisional and speculative, told before the events they concern have settled into any determinate shape. For this pre-narrative, pre-coherent, forward-leaning story material David Boje coined the term *antenarrative* — "ante" in the double sense of *before* the narrative and a *bet* placed, as at a wager, on a story not yet made (Boje, 2001, 2008, 2011). Where classical narrative looks backward from an ending to confer retrospective coherence, antenarrative looks forward from the unfinished middle in which we always actually stand, wagering on a sense that has not yet arrived. The concept, framed for organizations, is in fact a general phenomenology of the living story, and it bears directly on the individual life at exactly the point where the objections of Section V bite.

Consider Strawson. His explicit target is the *retrospective*, coherence-imposing, single-plot story told from a vantage that pretends to stand at the end and survey the whole; his Episodic wisely declines that vantage and refuses to confabulate a unity the open future does not warrant. But antenarrative shows that the retrospective closed plot was never the primary way a life is storied. A life is storied first and most of the time *from within, in mediis rebus*: in the anticipations by which one leans into the next hour, the plans made and revised, the half-told episodes, the competing versions offered by oneself and by others who shared the events. This storying imposes no false unity because it *claims* none; it is the ongoing, provisional, self-correcting labour of making tentative sense while the outcome remains open — precisely what honest engagement with an unfinished life looks like, and narrative through and through in the minimal but sufficient sense that it configures events in time under the aspect of what they might come to mean. The Episodic does not live without narrative; she lives the antenarrative life without the retrospective plot, and Strawson has shown the falsity of strong narrativity, not of narrativity as such. The same movement answers White and Lamarque: the antenarrative view neither expects nor desires the closure and single design of a literary work, and so escapes the charge of moralizing a life by finalizing it. And against the minimal self the view does not compete but incorporates: let there be a pre-reflective self-givenness at the root of experience; the philosophical question the philosophy of life presses is not whether there is bare experience but how such experience becomes a *life* — someone's, with a shape, a direction, and a meaning that can be owned. That transformation is antenarrative work, and the minimal self is precisely the one who *places the bets*, the living centre from which anticipations are cast forward and revisions folded back.

What secures this position philosophically is Bakhtin, whose thought supplies both its ethics and its ontology of the self, and whose vocabulary connects this inquiry to the existential concerns of the philosophy of life. In *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, Bakhtin (1919–1921/1993) argues that I occupy a once-occurrent place in Being from which I alone can act and for which I can have no alibi: the *non-alibi in Being (ne-alibi v bytii)* names the ineluctable

answerability (*otvetstvennost'*) of a self that cannot delegate its ethical moment to anyone else without abolishing its own reality. Selfhood, on this account, is not a substance but an event of answering — a signature placed, again and again, on acts performed from an irreplaceable position. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin (1929/1984) adds the correlative poetics: a living person can never be *finalized* (*nezavershennost'*, unfinalizability), never summed up or reduced to a completed image, for as long as a person lives the last word about them has not been spoken, and to pronounce that last word from outside — to close the story while the life continues — is a kind of violence against the freedom that consists in the capacity to exceed any account so far given. The self is therefore not a monological plot authored from a position of surplus but a *polyphony*, a chorus of voices, a story co-authored with others and never brought to a close while life endures. Unfinalizability explains why the coherence Strawson fears is not required; answerability explains why the openness of the story is not mere indeterminacy but an ethical condition; and polyphony explains why the relational dependence Arendt and Cavarero described is not a defect of narratable selfhood but its very medium.

The position that emerges may be named the *answerable, unfinalizable, antenarrative self*, and it occupies the ground that both the strong narrator and the anti-narrator have missed. Against the strong narrator, it denies that a self must close its life into a single coherent plot; against the anti-narrator, it denies that the alternative to such closure is a merely episodic or non-narrative existence. The intelligibility of a life demands not a finished, seamless, single-authored story but an open, answerable, co-authored, ongoing one. The proper contrast is not between narrative coherence and Episodic freedom, nor between the narrative self and the minimal self, but between a *closed* narrative that falsifies a life by finalizing it and a *living* narrative — antenarrative, answerable, unfinalizable — that keeps faith with a life still being lived. Mark Freeman (2010) marks the ethical delicacy of the difference: the backward glance of narrative reflection is at once a genuine source of moral insight, letting us grasp in hindsight what we could not see in the moment, and a standing temptation to rewrite the past in the foreclosing image of the present. The living story must hold both possibilities at once, claiming the insight while refusing the falsification — which is only to say, with Gadamer (1960/2004), that self-understanding is a movement within an open and historically effected horizon that no final interpretation ever closes.

A Strawsonian rejoinder is available at this point, and it must be met rather than evaded. Granting all of this, the objector may say, one has not refuted the Episodic but merely redescribed her: the force of Strawson's report was phenomenological — the Episodic finds *in her experience* no sense of herself as a persisting subject leaning into a personal future — so that to insist she is nonetheless "placing antenarrative bets" is either to contradict her testimony about her own life or to empty the word *narrative* of content by extending it to any anticipation whatever, including those of animals and thermostats. The objection is serious, and answering

it sharpens the position rather than softening it. The reply turns on a distinction the objection elides: that between the *phenomenological report* of how selfhood feels and the *constitutive structure* of a life as an intelligible whole. The antenarrative claim is not that the Episodic must *experience* her anticipations as episodes in the story of an enduring self; it is that her life is nonetheless *articulated* as a life — owned, continued, answered for — through configurations of past and future that she enacts whether or not she thematizes them as autobiography. And what distinguishes her bets from a thermostat's regulation is neither felt continuity nor an inner narrator but *answerability*: she stands, in Bakhtin's sense, in a once-occurrent position for which she can offer no alibi, and her anticipations are configured under construals of what her acts will have *meant* — a semantic and ethical dimension that no merely causal anticipation possesses. The Episodic, then, is not a counterexample to narrativity but its limiting case: the self who narrates least reflectively while still, in the only sense the thesis requires, living a configured and answerable life. Strawson has refuted the claim that selfhood *feels* like an extended story; he has not touched the claim that a life *is* an answerable configuration of time. The descriptive thesis, chastened, survives in exactly the form the philosophy of life needs: not that we all recount our life-stories to ourselves, but that to live a human life at all is to be underway in one.

6. An Antenarrative Analytic of a Life

If the self is antenarrative, then the interpretation of a life requires categories fitted to a story still in the making rather than to a finished plot, and here the philosophy of life can borrow — and repay — a debt to the analysis of storytelling in organizations. Boje's account of antenarrative processes is standardly articulated through seven interlocking "B's" — *Before*s, *Being*, *Becoming*, *Bets*, *Beneath*, *Beyond*, and *Between* — developed to track the living story of a collective before it congeals into official narrative (Boje, 2011, 2014). Transposed from the organization to the single human life, these categories compose a modest analytic that is at once grounded in the philosophical apparatus of the preceding sections and usable for the concrete interpretation of a life as it is lived forward. We propose it here as the paper's methodological contribution.

The *Before*s are the thrown past and the inherited stories into which one is born — the facticity, in Heidegger's sense, that one did not choose and yet must take over. *Being* is the once-occurrent present position, the here-and-now for which, on Bakhtin's account, one can have no alibi. *Becoming* is the directional self-transformation across time — the *ipse* held through change, the quest whose good is not fully specifiable in advance. *Bets* are the forward wagers on a meaning not yet arrived, the protentional anticipations by which a life leans into its future before the future has settled: the properly antenarrative moment. *Beneath* is the tacit, embodied, pre-reflective ground of the minimal self and the life-world — the sedimented habit

and mood beneath any explicit telling. *Beyond* is the horizon of the not-yet and of what exceeds the given: being-toward-death, and the ethical or spiritual claims that transcend present circumstance. *Between* is the relational, dialogic space in which the story is co-authored with others — the polyphony to which, with Arendt and Cavarero, the disclosure of who one is is finally entrusted.

The value of the analytic is that it holds these seven dimensions open *simultaneously*, refusing the premature collapse into a single retrospective plot that the objections of Section V rightly feared. To read a life antenarratively is not to reconstruct the story it turned out to be but to attend to the bets still outstanding, the befores still being reinterpreted, the betweens still unresolved — to grasp the life as the unfinalizable, answerable configuration it is *while it is still underway*. Such an analytic yields not the closure of biography but something more faithful to a life as it is lived, and more useful to a philosophy of life that means to take its object as it finds it: unfinished. It also indicates a research programme, extending the authors' prior work on antenarrative and organizational storytelling toward a philosophy of the storied life — one in which the categories tested on the life of institutions are turned, with the requisite modifications, upon the life of the person.

7. Meaning, Authenticity, and Self-Creation

Three classical questions of the philosophy of life can now be restated with the precision the position affords: the meaning of a life, its authenticity, and the modern project of composing or "styling" a life as one's own.

The *meaning of a life* is, on this account, neither a datum to be discovered beneath existence nor a purpose imposed from beyond it, but a configuration to be achieved: the drawing of the discordance of a life — its sufferings, accidents, and choices — into a concordance in which those elements come to stand for something rather than nothing. This is the signifiatory work Ricoeur ascribed to emplotment, and it is confirmed from opposite ends of the philosophical spectrum. Viktor Frankl (1946/2006), writing from the extremity of the camps, found that the endurance of suffering depended on the capacity to situate it within a meaning reaching beyond the present moment — to hold a future and a task toward which one remained underway. Susan Wolf (2010), reasoning within analytic value theory, argues that meaning arises where subjective engagement meets objective worth, where one is actively gripped by projects and relationships whose value exceeds one's own states of mind. Both accounts are narrative in form: meaning is a property not of isolated instants but of a life's *trajectory*, its investments carried forward and its episodes gathered into a significance that only extended, storied engagement can sustain. This is why the collapse of the capacity to narrate — in severe depression, in the temporal shattering of trauma, in the erosion of experiential connectedness — is suffered not as the loss of an ornament but as an assault on meaning itself, and why the

recovery of meaning so characteristically takes the form of a recovery of story: the renewed ability to say how one came to be here and toward what one is bound.

Authenticity, the theme the philosophy of life inherits from existential thought, is likewise reconceived. It is not the excavation of a fixed true self beneath one's roles but a matter of *authorship*, and its structure is the one Heidegger described. The inauthentic life is the life narrated by *das Man*, the anonymous "they" — lived according to a story so ready-made that no one need answers for it, in which one does what "one" does without ever taking up the telling as one's own; the authentic life is the resolute *retrieval* of thrown possibilities as one's own, the owning of even what one did not choose by making it the material of a life for which one will answer (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Authenticity, so understood, is not self-sufficiency but answerability — Bakhtin's non-alibi lived as the readiness to stand behind the ongoing, co-authored telling of one's life. And it is here that the narrative view converges with the ancient intuition of Arendt (1958/1998) and Cavarero (2000): who one is becomes manifest only in a story whose full meaning is entrusted to others and completed only when a life has run its course.

The modern project of *self-creation* and *lifestyle* is neither simply endorsed nor simply refused but reframed. Nietzsche (1882/1974) gave the aspiration its memorable formula — to "give style" to one's character, surveying the strengths and constraints of one's nature and shaping them into a single artistic plan — and Foucault (1988) recovered from antiquity a repertoire of "technologies of the self," practices by which individuals deliberately work upon their own conduct and mode of being to make of existence an object of care and craft. The antenarrative position embraces the aspiration while warning against its characteristic corruption. To style a life is to compose a story; but a life composed as though it were a *closed* literary artifact — a personal brand curated for display, a self optimized for coherence and consumption — courts exactly the falsification Strawson, White, and Nietzsche himself warned of, smoothing the discordant into a marketable unity and finalizing prematurely what should remain open. The alternative is not to abandon self-authorship but to practise it in the mode proper to a living story: provisionally, revisably, answerably, in response to others rather than in performance before them. The good life, on this account, is not the well-plotted life but the well-*authored* one — a life whose author remains answerable, keeps the story open, and resists both the anonymity of the ready-made narrative and the vanity of the finished one.

None of this requires the strong claims the objections of Section V demolished. It does not require that everyone experience life as one continuous story, nor that a life be closed into a single plot to be worth living, nor that there be no self prior to narration. The Episodic is left her freedom, the moralizing closure of White's well-formed plot is refused, and the minimal self is granted its due. What remains, and suffices, is that a human life is lived from within as an answerable, forward-leaning, co-authored storying of a time that is one's own —

antenarrative in its openness, unfinalizable in its freedom, and answerable in its ethics. That, and not the finished autobiography, is what it is to live a human life from the inside.

Conclusion: The Story One Is Still Telling

The philosophy of life is right to place life — rather than being, substance, consciousness, or language — at its centre; but life, as it is humanly lived, is inescapably storied, and the task is to say in what sense. This paper has argued that the thesis "life is narrative" survives its two strongest objections once it is freed from an assumption it never needed: that to story a life is to *finalize* it, to compose from an imagined vantage at the end a single coherent plot that gathers everything into inevitability and moral sense. Against that assumption the objections are decisive — such finalizing is neither universal in fact nor admirable as an ideal, and a minimal self underlies every telling. But the assumption was a mistake *about narrative*, not a truth about it. Grounded in the Augustinian aporia of time and the Aristotelian poetics of emplotment, articulated as the mediation of *idem* and *ipse* in Ricoeur's narrative identity, and completed by Bakhtin's non-alibi and unfinalizability together with the antenarrative phenomenology of the living story, the thesis names a self that is narrative precisely in being *unfinished*: an answerable authorship of a time that is one's own, always underway, never closed.

To be a self, on this account, is to be responsible for a story one is still telling and cannot yet read whole. That responsibility is the ethical core the narrative view shares with the philosophy of life at its best: not the demand that we impose a plot, but the demand that we *answer* — that we take up the telling of our own lives, with and for others, and keep it open until it is, by our death and in the memory of those who survive us, told at last by someone else. A philosophy of life adequate to its subject must therefore be, among other things, a philosophy of that unfinished, embodied, and answerable telling: not a philosophy of the story that has been completed, but of the story that is still, at every living moment, being told.

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